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Investigating the Problems of Teaching and Learning English in Middle Schools in Iran

INVESTIGATING THE PROBLEMS OF TEACHING AND LEARNING ENGLISH IN MIDDLE SCHOOLS IN IRAN

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Abstract: The present research aimed to investigate the problems of teaching and learning English in middle schools in Esfahan, Iran. These problems are associated with the learner, teacher, textbook, syllabus, and language policy. The instrument used was a self-constructed likert scale questionnaire. All the variables had a hand in the problems among which textbook, syllabus and language policy had the most effect. Twenty five problems were distinguished among which some are as follows: students do not consider pair work important; most of the time, most teachers do not speak in English in the classroom; the textbook does not include CDs or cassettes, does not consists of all the English Skills; the syllabus does not include one or two projects for students apart from the midterm or final test, Language Policy being not completely familiar with the steps of EFL teaching, does not selecting the most qualified and proficient teachers in EFL teaching. It can be concluded that the language policy should take a practical step in reducing the problems by changing the textbooks and providing more teaching aids for the teachers.

Keywords: *teaching and learning English, problems of teaching and learning English, middle school, Iran*

INTRODUCTION

Teaching and learning English has been a crucial issue in developing countries particularly in Iran. Most teachers have concerns about teaching and learning English and what methods and approaches are the best for students. As the same result, problems in teaching and learning English have always existed. In Iran, students graduate from school while they are not able to communicate in English (Dahmardeh 2006; Karimnia & Zade 2007). In order to know what factors contribute to such problems, it is better to know what the characteristics of a good language learner, a teacher, a textbook, a syllabus, and a language policy are. So by going through literature, one can find out these characteristics, afterwards by

using a questionnaire, the opinions of the students towards learning English can be investigated and based on the objectives of the study it can be tried to specify the problems of teaching and learning English.

Rubin and Thompson (1983) as cited in Nunan (2006: 57-58) have conducted a well-known study in which they state that good language learners tend to have the following characteristics which make them distinct from other learners:

Good learners

1. Find their own way
2. Organize information about language
3. Are creative and experiment with language

4. Make their own opportunities, and find strategies for getting practice in using the language inside and outside the classroom
5. Learn to live with uncertainty and develop strategies for making sense of the target language without wanting to understand every word

Brown (2001: 430) has provided a list of the attributes of a good language teacher. In the following list, a good language teacher has the four features (a few of the characteristics are mentioned here):

Good Language-Teaching Characteristics
Technical Knowledge

1. understands the linguistic systems of English phonology, grammar, and discourse.
2. comprehensively grasps basic principles of language learning and teaching.

Pedagogical Skills

3. has a well-thought-out, informed approach to language teaching.
4. understands and uses a wide variety of techniques.

Interpersonal Skills

5. is aware of cross-cultural differences and is sensitive to students' cultural traditions.
6. enjoys people; shows enthusiasm, warmth, rapport, and appropriate humor.

Personal Qualities

7. is well organized, conscientious in meeting commitments, and dependable.
8. is flexible when things go awry.

Hutchinson and Torres (1994) as cited in Azizifar, Koosha, & Lotfi (2010) stress the importance of textbooks and textbook evaluation by stating that learning and teaching would be difficult without the existence of text books. In

Iran, Azizifar, Koosha, and Lotfi (2010) have evaluated Iranian high school books and they have come to the result that because these text books lack the listening activities, they do not provide any special group works for the EFL learners and the students will not learn how to communicate in English.

Regarding syllabus, many have worked on that such as Trepanier (2008). In China, the newly issued National English Syllabus Standard (Department of Education, P.R.C. 2003) for compulsory education states that "English learning is not only a process for students to master English knowledge and skill and improve their practical language use but also a process for teachers to train their will, mold their temper, enrich their life, develop their individual character and abilities and sharpen humanist qualities".

Nunan (2006: 5) puts forward that there are many opinions about the differences between a syllabus and curriculum development. He provides two approaches to syllabus design, "a broad and narrow approach" in which the first believes in the integration of content and tasks, while the latter seeks to distinct the syllabus design and methodology.

Language policy which is considered as the last variable, by itself can make constraints for the learning process. Some definitions have been brought by different writers (Romaine (2006), Tollefson & James as cited in deJong, (1994), TESL-EJ)). The Wikipedia (the free encyclopedia) implies as follows:

Language Policy is what a government does either officially through legislation, court decisions or policy to determine how languages are used, cultivate language skills needed to meet national priorities or to establish

the rights of individuals or groups to use and maintain languages.

Jing (2005) in a study tried to gain access to the difficulties of EFL learning through the diaries of the learners. In his study he concluded that although the learning difficulties are due to the linguistics competence, their linguistic problems may be "a product of the relationship between their linguistic competence and the demands that examinations (e.g., TEM-4) placed on it".

Apart from that, Musavi (2001) as cited in (Razmjoo & Riazi, 2006) argued that teachers in high school classes put more emphasis on grammar than reading comprehension and communicative tasks. He said that owing to the following factors, teaching English did not provide the expected aims:

1. Students' ignorance of aims and goals of learning a new language and its advantages
2. Unqualified teachers and lack of teaching facilities
3. Old methods and styles of teaching
4. Old, unoriginal and out of date resources
5. Lack of native speakers who have a good command of English

By going through the literature, although the good qualities have been specified, still the problems in EFL teaching exist, particularly in Iran and no special article has been conducted in this regard, investigating the problems of EFL teaching in secondary schools. Therefore, in order to decrease these problems, the goal of this study is to delve into this matter and investigate the existing problems in learners, teachers, textbook, syllabus, and language policy. This study tried to answer what are the problems of teaching and learning English caused by learners, teachers, textbook, syllabus and language policy.

METHOD

In this study, we are looking for the problems of teaching and learning English by a survey. In other words, the researcher seeks to know the opinions of students about the problems of teaching and learning English. One hundred (fifty male and fifty female) middle school students were chosen randomly from the population. The participants in this study were the third grade students of two middle schools in Zarrinshahr, Esfahan.

The instrument of the study was a self-constructed likert scale questionnaire (with a Cronbach Alpha reliability of $r = .89 > .8$ and based on George and Mallery (2003), it is considered to be a good reliability) which is divided into five parts: The first part: learner with 7 items, the second part: teacher with 9 items, the third part: textbook with 7 items, the fourth part: syllabus with 7 items, and the fifth part: language policy with 7 items.

The questionnaire was translated into the native language of the students, because it was thought that they would not understand the items. A pilot study was conducted. Ten students of the third grade from Komeil middle school in Esfahan were randomly selected. Before doing the task, the items of the questionnaire were clarified. Twenty minutes were required to complete the task. Revisions were made based on the feedback obtained from the above procedure. For collecting the data, 2 days were allocated to go to the two middle schools mentioned above and administer the survey.

The analyses were completed using SPSS 14.0 software (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences). SPSS was used to see which factors (i.e. teacher, learner, textbook, syllabus, and language policy) and items had the greatest cause in the problems of teaching and learning English.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The beneath paragraphs will report the results of the present study based on the five research questions. The hypothesis of this study was that each factor (i.e. learner, teacher, textbook, syllabus, and language policy) have no effects on the problems of teaching and learning English.

According to the first research question, "What are the problems of teaching and learning English caused by learner?", Chi-square on the answers of one hundred participants to the first seven items belonging to the first part of the questionnaire was taken (see table 2).

The results of Item 5 and 7 showed that there are no meaningful differences between those who agreed, disagreed and had no idea I5 & I7 (i.e. I5, I7 > 0.05), so they are not accepted. However, the results of the other items showed that there are meaning differences among those who agreed, disagreed and had no idea (i.e. I1, I2, I3, I4, I6 < 0.05), so these are accepted. Based on these results, it can be said that the system of learning at secondary schools and not considering per work important and not having any plans for it by learners have played a role in the problems of EFL learning.

According to the second research question, "What are the problems of teaching and learning English caused by teacher? and as shown in table 3, Chi-square of the second nine items belonging to the first part of the questionnaire was taken.

As the table above shows, the results of Items 8, 9, 13, 14, 15 revealed that there are not meaning differences between those who agreed, disagreed, and had no idea (i.e. I8, I9, I13, I14, I15 > 0.05); therefore, these items are avoided. However, the results of Items 10, 11, 12, 16 revealed that there are significance differences between those who agreed, disagreed, and had no idea (i.e. I10, I11, I12, I16 < 0.05), so these items are accepted and considered as problems.

According to the third research question, "What are the problems of teaching and learning English caused by textbook?", the Chi-square of the third seven items are taken and shown in table 4.

Test Statistics

The results of this part showed that only in one item, there are no significance differences between those who agreed, disagreed, and had no idea (i.e. I18 > 0.05) so this item is not accepted. While based on the results, the other

Table 2
Test Statistics of Items 1-7

T-test	I1	I2	I3	I4	I5	I6	I7
Chi-Square(a,b)	12.200	17.500	26.900	80.000	4.300	21.000	7.300
df	4	4	4	4	4	4	4
Asymp. Sig.	.016	.002	.000	.000	.367	.000	.121

Table 3:
Test Statistics

T-test	I8	I9	I10	I11	I12	I13	I14	I15	I16
Chi-Square(a,b)	7.100	2.900	48.800	55.300	57.300	2.300	7.700	3.700	39.700
Df	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4
Asymp. Sig.	.131	.575	.000	.000	.000	.681	.103	.448	.000

Table 4:
Test statistics

T-test	I17	I18	I19	I20	I21	I22	I23
Chi-Square(a,b)	19.600	6.100	118.300	13.700	10.300	11.800	39.100
Df	4	4	4	4	4	4	4
Asymp. Sig.	.001	.192	.000	.008	.036	.019	.000

items were significant among those who agreed, disagreed, and had no idea (i.e. I17, I19, I20, I21, I22, I23 <0.05) thus these items are considered as problems of teaching and learning English. In other words, it can be said that textbook has a main role in the problems of EFL learning by not having the above characteristics.

According to the fourth research question, "What are the problems of teaching and learning English caused by syllabus?", Chi-square of the fourth seven items are demonstrated in table 5.

As the table above displays, only the result of one item was not significant among those who agreed, disagreed, and had no idea (i.e. I27 >0.05); therefore, this item is avoided. However, the results of the rest items were significant among those who agreed, disagreed, and had no idea (I24, I25, I26, I28, I29, I30 <0.05) thus these items are accepted and can

be considered as the problems. In other words, it can be said that syllabus also has a main role in the problems of EFL learning by not having the above characteristics as well.

According to the fifth research question, "What are the problems of teaching and learning English caused by language policy?" the Chi-square of the fifth seven items were calculated and are shown in table 6.

Based on the table above, the results of all the items of this part showed meaningful differences among those who agreed, disagreed, and had no idea (i.e. I31, I32, I33, I34, I35, I36, I37 <0.05); therefore, these items are accepted. In other words, it can be stated that Language Policy has also a main role in the problems of EFL teaching, due to the meaningful difference of the all items concerning this variable and not following these issues mentioned above.

Table 5.
Test Statistics

T-test	I24	I25	I26	I27	I28	I29	I30
Chi-Square(a,b)	12.800	37.300	26.000	2.500	34.300	17.100	27.700
Df	4	4	4	4	4	4	4
Asymp. Sig.	.012	.000	.000	.645	.000	.002	.000

Table 6
Test Statistics

T-test	I31	I32	I33	I34	I35	I36	I37
Chi-Square(a,b)	47.800	12.800	15.400	41.500	38.000	35.100	34.700
Df	4	4	4	4	5	4	4
Asymp. Sig.	.000	.012	.004	.000	.000	.000	.000

CONCLUSION

This study provided the ways a researcher can come across to the existing problems in EFL teaching and by conducting this, we can gain the knowledge of which variable has more effect on these problems and after that trying to do something in order to solve these problems. Based on the results, the hypothesis of the study was rejected; therefore, now one can take action in dissolving these problems by making use of the reasonable findings in this study.

The problems specified in learner were that they do not consider pair work important and do not have any plans for it. We should change the way the learner thinks of pair work and seeking to show them how important pair work can be even in the schools not only in private institutes. The problems in teacher were not speaking in English in the classroom most of the times, not asking the students to speak in English as much as possible, not using computer (e.g. PowerPoint software) in teaching, not paying attention to the students' correct pronunciation. The problems which syllabus leads to were the fact that most teachers do not provide students with the syllabus at the first or second session of the semester, they do not follow their syllabus till the end of the educational year, students do not think the syllabus is well organized, it does not include movies and listening apart from other planning, does not include one or two projects for students apart from the midterm or final test, does not mention the deadline of the projects. If language policy accepts to help teachers in any way, the problems which they cause would be reduced and they would alter their approaches in teaching and in bringing their syllabus to the class and trying to consider teaching in schools as seriously as possible. Language policy should accompany in this process and revise the textbook and do its best to

afford money for using technology in English classrooms and selecting the most proficient English teachers.

For further research, the researchers can include the opinions of the teachers, language policy, and textbook writers as well in order to gain more precious results and take actions in solving the problems. Of course, they should know the limitations here, which can refer to the fact that all schools would not welcome the researchers gladly thus one must go to the Department of Education to get the authority for going to the expected schools and administer the questionnaire or any other sorts of survey.

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